

Accreditation of prior experiential learning in France: an evolving system with national characteristics

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this article is to examine the French system of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) in the light of experiences elsewhere in Europe. We shall do so by determining the extent to which the institutional characteristics of the system and the way in which it is put into practice reflect some of the main French societal characteristics of the training and certification system and its place in the labour market. However, we shall also consider the extent to which this new system departs from the traditional system and meets new socio-political and economic challenges. The article is based on a reading of the law and on the initial analyses and data available.

Recognition of non-formal learning is a tool that many European countries are using in the context of lifelong learning. It may vary in form radically from one country to another. Each system is based on 'the organisation of political principles, the strategies of stakeholders and the rules and instruments. That system is then structured societally, in other words it takes on the form of a particular society' (Verdier, 2008).

APEL is not an entirely new concept in France. It is based on the traditional qualification system and has developed from the initial learning accreditation systems dating back to the 1980s. However, APEL has a number of new features. It opens up a new

pathway towards certification, which is in principle compulsory for all recognised forms of certification. It enhances the role of professional experience.

This article will report on the French APEL experience in the light of experiences in other European countries. We shall examine how far it is possible to talk of a French model of APEL, how far the institutional characteristics and methods of implementing APEL fit into the existing education and training system, and also how this innovation departs from that system and labour market rules. The article is based on a reading of the law and on the initial analyses and data available. It is not an evaluation of the APEL system, since the system was only developed between 2002 and 2003, its effects are still new and uncertain, and precise data are not yet available.

Although there is consensus on APEL among the various institutional stakeholders, the operation and use of this new system are still not clearly defined, allowing each of the partners to redefine their roles in the certification system (Part I). Individual access, results, achievements and filtering processes are indicative of the problems with the system (Part II). In a comparison with other European countries, the relationship between this new form of access to certification and the role of certificates in the training system and on the labour market can then be considered (Part III).

Strong consensus between stakeholders, different strategies

The principles embodied in accreditation of prior experiential learning are more or less common to all the stakeholders. However, the application and uses of the system are still ill-defined. Learning processes are being developed, allowing the various stakeholders to redefine their roles, and that process is not without its problems.

Principles of accreditation of prior experiential learning

In 1999 the Secretary of State for Vocational Training, Nicole Péry, took up the idea of accreditation of prior learning suggested by Michel de Virville in a report to the Ministry of Labour in 1996. The accreditation of skills, however they were acquired, needed to be promoted in order to improve access to qualifications and their award. Several arguments were put forward in the parliamentary debates (Assemblée nationale, 2000; Terrier, 2002). Access to

certification, whether through initial or continuing training, is very uneven. Certification is now a major factor in sustainable integration into working life. At the same time, with the rapid changes in the employment market, work experience is not sufficiently recognised by certification. Individuals and enterprises nevertheless need sound criteria for the assessment of skills and knowledge, particularly when a person is moving from one employer to another. There appears to be a need for tools to make the procedures more reliable. Thus APEL serves the dual purpose of combating uneven access and making the labour market more flexible.

Accreditation of prior experiential learning, based on the 2002 Social Modernisation Law (Law No 2002-73, 17 January 2002, Chapter II), in principle enables all individuals (employees, the self-employed, jobseekers, volunteers, civil servants) who can provide proof of at least three years' personal, professional or voluntary experience, whether continuous or intermittent, to have that experience recognised by a certificate without having followed a training course. That includes all certificates, vocational qualifications and other forms of certification included in the RNCP (*Répertoire national de la certification professionnelle* – National Register of Vocational Certification) set up at the same time as the APEL system.

The decisions taken on that occasion sum up the French model (Assemblée nationale, 2000; Terrier, 2002):

- Not introducing specific certification for the accreditation of prior learning; that is consistent with the French certificate model (contrary to the proposal by Michel De Virville). The APEL rules are to be incorporated in the Education Code, a clear indication of the priority given to the educational dimension.
- The idea is not therefore to create a separate system but to rely on the existing certificates listed in the RNCP, in order to make the system clearer. The aim is, firstly, to avoid competition between forms of certification and, secondly, to make certification available in a form that is systematically accessible via APEL.
- All existing certifications will in principle be eligible for accreditation, thereby avoiding conflicts between possible competitors in the certification system.

APEL is therefore an additional fourth method of certification, in the same way as initial school education, apprenticeship and continuing training. However, even if there is more or less a consensus on the principles of APEL, the same does not necessarily apply to the implementing arrangements and the allocation of roles and resources between the institutions involved.

Trade unions and employers: consensus on APEL principles, but not without debate

Trade unions and employers' organisations have supported the principles of APEL since 2002. In 2003, when the National Multi-Industry Agreement on access to lifelong learning for employees was signed, that concept was seen as an opportunity and as a means of promoting individual professional development. Under a supplement to the agreement (supplement 2 of 20 July 2005) APEL and the conditions for its implementation are to be developed, in particular through access to CQPs⁽¹⁾, opportunities for special APEL leave, and the possibility for company expenditure on APEL to be charged to the firm's training budget and/or an *Organisme Paritaire Collecteur Agréé* (Approved Joint Collection Body).

Most trade union organisations see APEL as a benefit for employees, particularly from the point of view of protection and promotion. They encourage access to APEL, provide funding and devise policies to support those involved in the procedure. Nonetheless, there has been – and still is – opposition in some sectors and for some occupations, especially those subject to 'occupational' access rules (where a qualification or certificate is required): concern that certificates will be devalued and a wish to adhere strictly to procedures, particularly in order to avoid the accreditation of 'unauthorised' experience.

For employers' organisations, APEL would make it easier to control training costs. Employees can gain accreditation of their professional experience without attending formal training sessions. Furthermore, even if the person gains partial rather than full accreditation for the certificate through the APEL procedure, a shorter period of training might be needed to obtain the rest of the certificate.

(1) CQP: *Certificat de Qualification Professionnelle* (Vocational Qualification Certificate), introduced and awarded by industrial sectors and recognised by the collective agreement or the industry-wide agreement to which it relates.

In firms or sectors where a qualification is an important indicator, APEL is therefore a sensible alternative to formal training. In some undertakings, promoting an APEL policy might improve access to vocational training leading to a qualification and encourage internal mobility. Furthermore, since the emphasis is on work experience, APEL could become part of skills management policy and even an essential tool of that policy. Nonetheless it is not certain that APEL is accepted by all employers, especially when they are concerned that qualified workers will leave or be poached.

Similar problems arise with CQPs. Some CQPs are known to be very specific and others fairly general, competing with public certifications (Veneau, Charraud, Personnaz, 1999). Some trade unions and employers' organisations have expressed reservations about the inclusion of CQPs in the RNCP. Firstly, they objected to the procedure by which public qualifications would automatically be included in the RNCP and CQPs would not, on the grounds that certifications had to be treated equally since, in both cases, it is their involvement (vocational advisory committees, joint industry committees) that has given partial or full legitimacy to these certifications. Secondly, they do not want the control of CQPs to be removed from their industry, at the risk of some being abolished since they duplicate other qualifications in the RNCP. At present, at the request of the trade unions, CQPs may be obtained through APEL without having to be registered in the RNCP. The conflict seems to have abated since the first CQPs were registered. A number of industries now support and encourage APEL as a pathway towards a CQP.

Training and certificate providers: fear of competition for training

In most cases, training and certification providers have quickly managed to open up access to certification via APEL. This was mainly due to the fact that the changes to the design of qualifications had started well before that (especially the design of occupational and skills reference systems (Möbus, Verdier, 1997)) and systems pre-dating APEL had already been tested. In other organisations, such as the Ministry of Health, the change began more recently, but is progressing rapidly. In that case too, however, there have been and still are problems, reflecting both the priority given to initial

education and training in France (with which APEL is potentially competing) and the knowledge transmission/acquisition model, which is strongly biased towards formal training.

When the 2002 law was being drawn up, the Ministry of Education expressed serious reservations (Merle, 2007). Some of those problems stem from the lack of progress in developing APEL at university level. In some disciplines there is a 'not in my backyard' attitude: some feel that APEL is fine and appropriate for related disciplines but not their own. Some teachers and trainers see APEL as devaluing qualifications; the lack of formal training would mean that the standards of the knowledge and skills acquired could not be guaranteed. This was a particular concern when major social value is attached to the certification, for instance the qualifications obtained from the Grandes Écoles and Écoles d'Ingénieurs (Feutrie, 2003). Encouraging people to obtain partial certification might then be a solution, since candidates would have to follow training courses. As M. Pons-Desoutter (2007) pointed out in a Breton university, 'the panel system is essentially geared to partial accreditation'. Some training providers also fear that the APEL system will be more attractive than training courses. Young people might prefer to gain professional experience and only go back to obtain accreditation at a later date, a few years after failing the initial training. APEL would then reduce the flow of trained staff and hence of financial resources.

H. Lenoir (2002) further confirms the problems that have arisen in the universities. The system interferes with practices and a culture that have existed for centuries. Firstly, APEL alters how knowledge is acquired since it is now acquired through professional experience as well as formal training. Those two avenues now lead to equal recognition. New occupations and methodologies are emerging, such as support staff who specifically help candidates to present their experience. The issue is one of the legitimacy of the certificate obtained by APEL. The relationship to the public is also changing. Older and more experienced people with very different career paths will be applying to universities. The universities' relationship with the business world also has to change, as evidenced by the need to relate knowledge acquired at university to knowledge acquired through practice, and the requirement for professionals to sit on APEL panels.

The APEL law sets out the legal conditions for access to APEL, but it does not suggest ways in which the system might be operated in order to address the changes we have just outlined. The universities have therefore had to develop their practice at the same time as they deal with the large volume of APEL applications. That is why there are currently so many different practices, in terms of duration, information and support methods and also price (from EUR 100 to EUR 1 000).

APEL policy: government coordination needed

In view of the objectives set and the problems in implementing APEL, it became clear that coordination was needed (IGAS, 2005). An Interministerial Committee was therefore set up in 2006, with responsibility for planning, coordinating and monitoring the implementation and development of policy on APEL.

An APEL development plan has been drawn up. It provides, firstly, for the launch of a national information campaign in particular on the APEL procedure and on information points. The campaign targets not just individuals but also enterprises, to encourage joint APEL initiatives. The aim is also to simplify and coordinate the administrative procedure, in view of the differences in practice between the various certifying bodies. A national application form was therefore introduced. However, that by no means met with general approval, since all the certifying bodies had already introduced their own forms locally based on their own understanding of the APEL scheme. A support plan clarifying the role of support for accreditation departments and candidates was drawn up. Also with a view to increasing and facilitating access to APEL, a decree was proposed to enable panel members to be paid from vocational training funds. One of the main obstacles to the development of APEL is the difficulty of recruiting panels, since there is no provision in the law for them to be remunerated. Lastly, the State is targeting its financing policy for APEL procedures on the unemployed. Only unemployed workers receiving payments from UNEDIC (Unemployment Insurance Scheme) are eligible for funding. The Ministry of Labour is therefore to offer financial assistance to unemployed persons not in receipt of allowances. A budget of EUR 10 million has been announced.

As regards assistance for enterprises, the State does not provide specific APEL support. The main objective is to run a campaign to raise awareness, provide information and simplify the APEL scheme, as well as to publicise examples of successful collective APEL schemes in particular firms. To that end, a national framework

agreement on the development of APEL was signed on 15 February 2007 by the State, MEDEF, CGPME, UPA, UNAPEL (2) and 16 business sectors. The signatories recognised that APEL could be an important tool for dealing with the challenge of economic competitiveness and hence recognition of skills.

The State therefore has a specific and targeted involvement in the operation of the APEL system. APEL practice is being developed by the various participants in the system (such as the universities, regional authorities and support institutions). As will be explained below, it is therefore difficult to coordinate the various stakeholders and ensure that APEL practice is consistent nationally.

Regional authorities: managing a new system

A whole range of partners are involved in the vocational training system, at many different levels. A recent report raised the 'fundamental question of control of the vocational training system' (Sénat, 2007). APEL comes within the scope of vocational training policy and is a State initiative; it is an integral part of the system and is similarly multi-level and multi-partner. It therefore faces the same problems, ranging from conflicting prerogatives to mobilisation of various sources of funding.

Steps were taken to decentralise APEL policy from 2002 to 2004, but the regional authorities applied themselves to the task in different ways and at different rates. The 2004 Law on local responsibilities (Law No 2004-809) reiterated that regional authorities were to organise the information, advice and guidance network in their areas. Thus the regional authorities are theoretically in charge of coordinating APEL policy locally, but that is far from easy.

Various information, employment policy and training institutions provide information and guidance (stage 1 in Figure 1). Some come under the State, others under the regional authorities, others under local authorities or the social partners. The certification providers are also involved, since firms and individuals may apply to them direct (when stages 1 and 2 in Figure 1 are combined).

In order to merge some of those institutions, an official information and guidance network for APEL and continuing training has been

(2) MEDEF: *Mouvement des Entreprises de France* – Association of French Enterprises; CGPME: *Confédération Générale du Patronat des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises* – General Confederation of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Employers; UPA: *Union Professionnelle Artisanale* – Professional Union of Craftsmen; UNAPEL: *Union Nationale des Professions Libérales* – National Union for the Professions.

set up, initially mainly State funded and then gradually under the control of each region.

To take the example of the Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur region (PACA), this had 17 advice points in its area, mainly funded by the State. The regional authority decided to take over full responsibility for this policy only in 2006. It abolished the advice points in order to create a more extensive network in the area (80 institutions at stage 1; 100 for stages 2 and 3, see Figure 1 below). Most of the institutions are now funded mainly by the region. For instance it gives a fixed sum to the university to set up a counselling system (in evaluation stage 3) for jobseekers. The PACA region has decided to target the unemployed and issue chequebooks to pay for support, thus competing with/complementing State employment policy. However, support is a new activity that is still at the development stage. Hence financial assistance for support is in no way an indication of the quality of the service, particularly since that part of the scheme is still fairly unclear in the 2002 law. The Ile-De-France region, persuaded of the essential role played by support, supplemented by APEL chequebooks, is asking providers to explain the content of their support services to financial backers and beneficiaries, although without imposing any methodological rules (Micheau and Szatan, 2007). Some regions are focusing their efforts on other important aspects of schemes. The Centre region, for instance, aims to encourage a partnership approach, based in particular on a technical body whose role is to organise a technical dialogue on APEL between regional partners, and on a political body that is in formal charge of the technical work and validates processes as they are under way (Aventur, 2007). The object is to coordinate the work of the various APEL partners locally, in order to improve procedures and reduce the dropout rate.

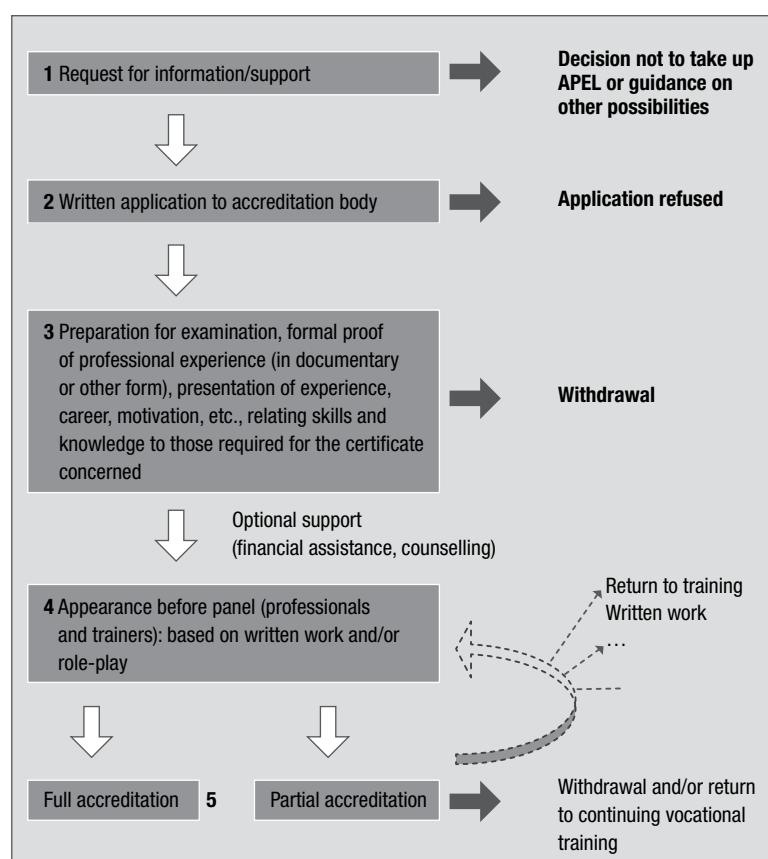
This complex picture results in a system that is still not clear to individuals or enterprises. It is difficult for them to find out with whom they should be dealing; there are overlaps between the institutions and their responsibilities, and financial support is sometimes unreliable. Thus there is consensus about the values of APEL, but a number of issues and problems still have to be resolved.

Individual APEL procedures

The APEL procedure can be broken down into several stages (Figure 1). Individuals usually begin the procedure by seeking

information (stage 1) from the bodies managed by the regional authorities or from the information services of the certifying bodies themselves. They then apply to a department that awards the qualification required (e.g. ministries and decentralised departments, chambers of commerce and industry) (stage 2). If the application for the required qualification is accepted (stage 3), applicants begin the process of obtaining accreditation for their experience, with or without support (preparing the application, presentation of experience, procedure, motivation, etc.). They then appear before a panel (stage 4) of professionals and trainers to explain their work (oral presentation and/or role-play), after which they obtain full or partial accreditation of his experience. In the first instance, the person leaves the APEL scheme and then takes further steps to

Figure 1. **APEL procedure: entering and leaving the scheme**



make the most of their qualification in employment and/or the training system (further study). In the second instance, if the knowledge represented by the experience appears insufficient, the person will have to appear before the panel again, having first carried out its instructions (written application, training period, etc.). A counsellor is sometimes appointed for that stage.

It is possible to leave or withdraw from the scheme at any stage.

Lengthy and difficult procedure

APEL is a 'lengthy and complex procedure, with uncertain results' (Kogut, 2006; Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005). As shown in the table below, not all applicants reach the stage of appearance before the panel. That suggests that there are several reasons for drop-out rates during the procedure and the APEL success rate.

We note, first of all, that requests for information and certifications awarded increased at the same time (by over 50 % between 2003 and 2006). Those figures point to increasing awareness of the scheme. The trend is also partly due to the extension of the range of possibilities (more ministries joining the scheme and new APEL certifications available). Furthermore, there was some concern as to the ability of the panels to deal with this new procedure. Questions might also be raised as to the risk of 'over-selectiveness' by panels, given the reservations of some trainers. That does not appear to be the case. Other more complex factors are at work to account for the dropout rate in the APEL process. When the number of certifications obtained is compared to the number requesting information, only 30 % of candidates validated the procedure by obtaining the required certificate. In view of the dropout rate at the various stages, the initial objectives are far from being achieved. Which seem to be the decisive stages?

In 2006, 20 % dropped out between acceptance of the application and appearance before the panel. That stage seems decisive. However, the rate is now going down by comparison with previous years. The scheme is becoming more efficient. Few candidates are dropping out between acceptance of their applications and appearance before the panel. In stage 3, are the candidates more competent than before? Are the participants more professional, is the support better, is the scheme easier to understand? Or are the candidates being more carefully selected when applications are assessed? On average, the dropout rate between the request for

	2006	2005	2004	2003
Stage 1: Number of requests for information at advice points	90 000	79 950*	79 907	44 714
Stage 2: Number of acceptable applications from people directed to APEL	60 000 33 % fewer than Stage 1	57 674	NA*	NA*
Stage 3: Presentation of experience/support	-	-	-	-
Stage 4: Number of applications considered by a panel	48 000 20 % fewer than Stage 2 47 % fewer than Stage 1	44 301 23 % fewer than Stage 2 44 % fewer than Stage 1	36 530 54 % fewer than Stage 1	24 900 44 % fewer than Stage 1
Stage 5: Number of certifications obtained	26 000 46 % fewer than Stage 4 71 % fewer than Stage 1	22 622 49 % fewer than Stage 4 72 % fewer than Stage 1	17 724 51 % fewer than Stage 4 77 % fewer than Stage 1	10 744 57 % fewer than Stage 4 75 % fewer than Stage 1

Source: Data from DGEFP report 2007 and works by Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005.

Source obtained from certifying ministries – DARES and CEREQ processing.

***Note:** Qualifications are being opened up gradually to APEL and certifying bodies have therefore introduced the APEL scheme at different rates. This makes it difficult to obtain complete figures from all ministries at every stage in the scheme, year by year. In addition, the trend in the figures can sometimes be attributed to a decline or improvement in data collection.

Interpretation: In 2006, the advice points received 90 000 requests for information and 60 000 applications were then submitted and accepted by a certifying body, i.e. 33 % of requests for APEL information are not followed up by entry to the scheme. 48 000 applications were then considered by the APEL panels, 20 % fewer than had joined the scheme at the beginning. Finally, we note that 26 000 candidates obtained certification; 46 % of the candidates who appeared before the panel failed and 71 % of those who had requested information withdrew.

information (stage 1) and appearance before the panel (stage 4) remains steady (about 50 %).

However, if the retention rate is increasing in the scheme between the acceptance of the application and appearance before the panel (stages 2 to 4), one of the issues crucial to the APEL scheme

therefore probably relates to the initial stages, the request for information and advice and the assessment of applications.

Requests for information do not necessarily lead on to the next stage. Although we have very few data for that stage, we note that, in 2006, 33 % of potential candidates withdrew between the information stage (stage 1) and the application assessment stage (stage 2). They decided not to proceed with APEL (through choice or because they were discouraged) or they were not directed towards or accepted for APEL because it was not appropriate for them (lack of experience, unsuitable project, etc.). Hence candidates are filtered out right from the start. Unfortunately we have very little information about that stage.

Finding one's way around the system and the range of possible certifications is still a difficult challenge for individuals and enterprises and appears to be a deterrent (Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005; Kogut, 2006 and DGEP, 2006). With such a wide choice of qualifications, it is not unusual for them to choose or be directed by an adviser to the wrong procedure or wrong qualification.

Enterprises also have internal selection procedures to ensure that the process is successful. They can filter out and select only the best candidates on the basis of personal records, standard of professional experience, difficulties with written and oral communication and so on.

Furthermore, the presentation of experience (stage 3) is a complex task, which might account for the fact that some candidates start the process but do not get as far as the panel. That stage raises the problem of 'recognition of skills applicable in the training world and those required in the world of employment' (Mayen and Métral, 2008). In their presentations (written work or role-play), the candidates, with or without support, have to explain the skills, abilities and knowledge they have acquired through experience and then relate them to the reference system for the required qualification. Thus the panels of professionals and trainers ultimately become a forum for debate between the two worlds (Mayen and Métral, 2008). Let us take a few examples. If candidates have not had the opportunity to use an essential resource in their work (relevant knowledge, correct equipment, correct method), they cannot show proof of the relevant skill when presenting their experience, but that does not mean that they do not possess that skill. Panels will have to find other ways of enabling them to demonstrate it (interview, document, etc.). They

will also have to agree on the significance of a particular ability (such as analytical ability). Throughout the discussion the panels will therefore list and indicate the significance of the skills and knowledge required to obtain the relevant qualification. Candidates will have to prepare for all this. It therefore seems entirely understandable that some are discouraged by the preparation (stage 3) even before they appear in front of the panel, given that the assessment criteria for the panel appearance are sometimes not clear. It is not clear how to prepare for something that the panels themselves are changing and adding to as they go along. Thus support for candidates seems vital for the presentation of experience, to enable them to prepare as thoroughly as possible for their panel appearance.

One of the main issues arising at this stage is whether or not this process is formative. If it merely 'formalises' knowledge already acquired, APEL is a process of identifying skills. If the process of presenting experience at that stage actually enhances the skills of employees and improves their cognitive and subjective abilities, giving an indication of their knowledge and skills (Leplâtre, 2005), then APEL is also a productive process and not simply a formalisation of knowledge. The latter view was already supported by some of the work on the old Validation des acquis professionnels (Accreditation of Prior Learning) scheme (Clot, 1999).

Comparing the success rates for the different qualifications sought by APEL candidates, it is noticeable that the rates vary considerably from one qualification to another and one speciality to another within the same qualification. For instance the success rate for CAPs ⁽³⁾ awarded by the Ministry of Education in 2005 is 71 % (DGEFP, 2007), as against 54 % for the BTS ⁽⁴⁾ from that Ministry. However, those success rates are very similar to those for continuing vocational training. Thus in 2005 (DGEFP, 2007) 81 % obtained a Ministry of Education CAP through continuing training, whilst 54 % obtained a BTS through continuing vocational training. However, the rates are sometimes less satisfactory for APEL, particularly for the *Brevet Professionnel* (41 % through APEL, compared with 70 % through continuing training). We note that those figures do not include partial accreditations. If these are not regarded as failures, the results with APEL will be even better.

In short, success rates are increasing and APEL is achieving

⁽³⁾ CAP: *Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle*, first level of qualification.

⁽⁴⁾ BTS: *Brevet de Technicien Supérieur*, two years after the school leaving certificate.

similar results to continuing vocational training. It might therefore be assumed that panels are not more selective than they are for continuing vocational training. It might also be suggested that the selection process prior to appearance before the panel is more rigorous with APEL and hence that the candidates are 'better' than those in the 'continuing training' system. However, it is impossible to test either of those assumptions on the basis of the data available at this stage.

The previous data and the work done on the APEL procedure (Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud; 2005; Kogut, 2006) show that success depends on a sensible use of resources in order for the process to be completed. The personal and financial investment it requires represents a considerable deterrent.

A supportive environment is essential. Candidates need sufficient information to decide on the right qualification and obtain support from enterprises and APEL institutions, especially in the complex stage of presenting the experience appropriate to the certificate required: counselling, financial assistance, self-confidence, a secure position. Clearly the negative effects of unemployment, such as lack

Financial and time costs

The length of the APEL procedure varies. It depends on individual choices and on institutional constraints. One of the main problems is the availability of panels in the final stage. Sometimes they meet only once or twice a year. The 2002 law does not provide for them to be paid, which tends to limit their availability even more. Several studies have shown that the APEL process can last from several months up to a year.

The process also requires a serious personal commitment, which will depend on the background of the individual, the type of qualification required and the assessment methods used (role-play or written work). The presentation of experience (stage 3) requires from 50 to over 100 hours' work. For candidates who are already in employment, a small part of that time can be taken from working hours, using special training leave. When the firm supports the procedure it will have no objection to the person taking leave. Other candidates will have to use their evenings and weekends to do the work.

The financial cost also varies, according to the type of qualification being sought and the situation of the candidate (working, unemployed, etc.). Candidates have to pay to register for the certificate, in the same way as students obtaining certificates through any other channel (from EUR 100 to over EUR 500). Added to that is the cost of support (stage 3), which, as explained earlier, helps to ensure the success of the APEL procedure. The cost varies; it may be free for some individuals whose circumstances qualify them for assistance, or may be as much as EUR 500 or more. That depends mainly on the institution that is providing the service and the methods (individual or group) used by the support staff, and on the duration (between a few hours and over 10 hours).

These financial and time costs might be met by candidates themselves or subsidised by the local authority (e.g. the APEL support cheques issued to the unemployed by the PACA Regional Council), or by the enterprise (the APEL costs will then be deducted from its statutory expenditure on vocational training).

of self-confidence (fear of failure) or domestic problems can be an obstacle to commitment to APEL. Some candidates will postpone the procedure until their circumstances improve.

Withdrawal by candidates might also be connected with their original motivation. If they were unemployed and the main aim was to find work, they might decide to drop out if they find another job during the procedure.

Finally, it must be emphasised that, when a candidate obtains a partial certification, he often returns to traditional formal training (Liaroutzos, Paddeu and Lozier, 2003). In fact, as is shown by the debates on individualisation (Correia, 2004 and 2005) and reliable procedures, the training available and the support arrangements are now proving very unsuited to modular training requirements linked to complex personal plans and partial accreditation of experience.

Personal motivation focused mainly on the labour market

In 2006, the qualifications most often applied for through APEL were in the field of personal services, at the lowest levels of certification (25.5 %). Unlike those for other certifying bodies (higher education, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Youth and Sport), the applications were mainly from women with few or no qualifications, reflecting the predominance of women in that sector. 8.2 % applications were for the BTS (Ministry of Education) and 2.5 % were applications for the qualification for work in the security sector (police option, Ministry of Education). It seems very clear that the APEL applications are aimed at directly improving the person's employment opportunities, since many of these qualifications are mandatory for such jobs.

In 2006 (DGEFP, 2007; Labruyère, 2006), one-third of the applicants were unemployed. The proportion of unemployed applicants is naturally higher for qualifications from the Ministry of Labour, which has concentrated its system and funding mostly on that section of the population. That confirms that the aim is directly to improve employment opportunities (protection and entry into working life for the unemployed and casual workers, as explained by Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005).

Employed and already qualified candidates are more common at the Ministry of Education and particularly in further education (mainly Baccalauréat (*school leaving certificate*) level + 3 and Baccalauréat level + 4). These are often people who are changing jobs and wish to obtain social recognition and reduce the disparity between their actual work and their initial level of training. However,

although they are focused on direct benefits in the employment market (promotion, change of job, job security), they might also sometimes wish to undertake further studies, which are shorter under the APEL system (Pons-Desoutter, 2007).

In fact, those who have had initial training sometimes prefer the APEL route to the continuing vocational training route for obtaining certain qualifications. When the two are compared for Ministry of Education certificates in 2006 (DGEFP, 2007), most of those awarded a hotel and catering BTS (53 %) followed the APEL procedure. APEL accounts for a significant proportion of other certificates (37 % for the electrical engineering BTS and 42 % for the childcare CAP). Those figures can be explained partly by the fact that employees already working in the sector concerned have to obtain the qualification if they are to continue working. APEL would then seem more appropriate for them, especially when the certifying body has opted to use the role-play method in the appearance before the panel, for level V applications in particular (roughly equivalent to CAP, BEP).

Hence the main motivation of candidates is directly related to the labour market. It appears, therefore, that the role of the certificate in sustainable integration into working life and external mobility is generally accepted. However, other motivations more or less unrelated to the labour market, such as further study or the need for social recognition, are also involved. Thus APEL corroborates the model of the French certificate, in terms of both its external value and its internal value in the educational system.

According to a study by M. Pons-Desoutter (2007), APEL candidates at the universities are similar to continuing training candidates. They have initial training to a high level and also far more professional experience than the statutory three years. Finally, the motivations of university APEL candidates for all the certificates eligible for APEL are largely vocational (change of job, development, returning to work or continuing work) and the object is to save time. It is estimated that the time saved in obtaining the certificate is one year (Pons-Desoutter, 2007).

New rules in the job market

So how should the scheme, its characteristics and practices be assessed in the light of the main societal features of the training system and the labour market?

Let us look first of all at APEL in the European context. European schemes for the accreditation of informal learning are all aimed at greater recognition of the formative nature of work. However, their acceptance is slow and gradual and national experience varies widely (Feutrie, 2007). For instance, the schemes in Bulgaria, Cyprus and Greece are not yet operational. In Member States such as Hungary, Poland and Romania, the principle of accreditation is accepted but it is still at the trial stage. Experience in Germany and Austria, particularly with unqualified sections of the population, is targeted and not comprehensive. Spain, Italy and Estonia have gone further with their trials, but they are currently in need of methodology and specialised professionals. Ireland, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands favour the local, decentralised approach (Feutrie, 2007). The accreditation of learning is not a new concept there, but their practices have only some principles in common and are therefore very diverse. Other countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, Portugal, Sweden, Norway) have managed to set up comprehensive schemes, but these are still in the early stages.

The effect of national training cultures seems to be the deciding factor. According to Feutrie (2007), this depends chiefly on the relationship between training and employment in the country concerned. That results in different forms of accreditation in terms of its results (special access, exemptions, credits and modules, award of certificates or certification) and the subject of the accreditation (knowledge, know-how, learning, general ability, etc.). The evaluation tools used will depend on those characteristics (compilation of supporting evidence, portfolio, records, on-the-job observation, interviews, traditional examinations). At the same time, the authorities operating the accreditation system vary from one country to another (reference institution, regional, national or sectoral authority).

Like most of the other European accreditation systems, the French APEL model therefore has two aspects.

The first relates to the type of skills/knowledge to be accredited. Schemes whose ultimate aim is in principle focused on the labour market may therefore be contrasted with those of a more educational nature.

In the first case, skills and knowledge are considered to have an immediate value in the labour market. Generally the aim is the accreditation of components of skills relating to basic tasks or functions. The elements are not necessarily connected to each other

or to the certification system involved in formal training. The British NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) are typical examples (Bessy, 2000). However, the trial scheme being developed in the Netherlands also appears to have the same characteristics, which are very different from those in the initial and continuing training system (Duvekot, Van Raai, 2007; Cedefop, Colardyn, Bjørnåvold, 2005). Cyprus is developing a system based largely on the British NVQ system (Isaias, 2007).

In the second case, although the 'labour market' objective still applies, accreditation is part of the national system of qualifications and certificates, the aim being to give equal status to accreditation and other avenues of formal training. One result is that the components of skills to be validated are generally broader and/or more interconnected. Partial accreditation is certainly possible (in France), but the main object is to obtain a qualification equivalent to initial training. That is the system in Norway and Sweden (Cedefop; Colardyn, Bjørnåvold, 2005; Bjørn, 2007; Fejes, 2007). There is continuity between the choices made for accreditation and those made previously for initial and continuing training.

The French APEL model is consistent with that approach, in that it does not introduce specific APEL qualifications. The main objective is to obtain a qualification equivalent to initial training. Nevertheless there is a slight difference, due to the internal variations in the system of qualifications and certificates. We know that a notable characteristic of the certificates awarded by the Ministry of Education is their dual purpose (education and the labour market). That will be less true of Ministry of Employment qualifications, which are geared solely to the labour market. However, the fact that these two types of certification coexist (with others) in a single national register and they are all classified by level, with a form of implicit equivalence allowing a diploma to be placed before a vocational qualification or vice versa, suggests that they should be equated.

The second aspect is the method of social recognition of qualifications and certificates. In some countries that is based chiefly on 'market' rules. The certifying bodies are part of a certification market. They are often independent of the training organisations. Confidence in their qualifications is based on a dual process: quality control, which is often undertaken by a different stakeholder (ISO standard quality control) and acceptance by the labour market. That model too is typical of the United Kingdom. In other countries, legitimacy depends on a form of regulation by central bodies,

whether it is the State, the social partners alone, or a more complex combination of the two. The design of qualifications and certificates in Norway, Sweden and France is more akin to this second model, although with significant differences that cannot be discussed here. Cyprus still appears to have strong central regulation, although it uses the NVQ model. The French APEL system is inspired by that model.

Thus the choices for the APEL model (e.g. no specific certification, a single RNCP, panels of similar composition, etc.) do indeed reflect the main societal characteristics of the French training system and the way in which it fits in with the labour market. However, APEL departs from the French model, notably by linking continuing training, accreditation of experience and a system of certification more characteristic of initial training, with a strict separation of initial and continuing training (Verdier, 2008). That difference, which, as we have seen, creates problems, relates mainly to the procedures for acquiring knowledge and skills. In the French 'educational' model (of which formal continuing training is an extension), knowledge is built up only through training. APEL offers a different route. It breaks away from the predominant idea of work that 'consumes' or even 'destroys' knowledge and suggests a different way of looking at work and accreditation of the skills acquired. In that sense, it challenges the French certificate system.

Conclusion

APEL is still a new policy, but its development is very much influenced by some of the main societal characteristics of the training and certification system and the labour market. That accounts for the difficulties experienced, the successes and failures.

Acceptance of the APEL certificate is based on the traditional French certificate model. APEL has inherited the problems caused by the dual value of the certificate, which explains, for instance, the numerous objections from the educational system and the different motives that can be identified for participation in APEL schemes (direct improvement of employment opportunities or other motivation).

APEL is also an integral part of public policy. It is one of the tools of active public employment policy. It follows the rules for the operation of the labour market and its recruitment policies, boosting

the role of the certificate. Finally, APEL is also influenced by the new stage of decentralisation of the education and training system, which reassigned the different roles.

However, this new system is a departure from the certificate system and thus meets new socio-political and economic challenges. It appears to go hand in hand with changes in the operating rules for the labour market, which in France has traditionally been dominated by the internal market. At a time of high unemployment, APEL could therefore be a way of responding to those trends as part of a policy for increasing external opportunities and possibly running down internal markets, whilst helping to make the procedure more reliable by formalising and reporting on experience. This individually focused system could change the position of workers, especially unemployed and unskilled workers, in the labour market and might (as explained earlier) offer a solution to manpower recruitment and redeployment problems (Triby, 2005).

However, in view of the failure rate and dropout rate throughout the APEL procedure, we have to consider the importance of individual responsibility in 'lifelong learning'. Especially since, as we have pointed out, very few firms have so far taken advantage of the scheme and the vast majority of applications are from individuals. Special attention therefore needs to be paid to support, both individually and in groups, when assessing the uses of APEL.

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